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BOARD OF
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: The Dubcek Pause

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No. 12-68

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 June 1968

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 12-68

SUBJECT: Czechoslovakia: The Dubcek Pause *

1. The related crises in internal Czechoslovak politics and in Soviet-Czechoslovak relations seem to have eased -- at home, into a delicate and perhaps temporary domestic equilibrium and, abroad, into an uneasy truce with Moscow. The regime of Party leader Dubcek and Premier Cernik has, in effect, promised that it will control the pace of domestic reform; Moscow has gained the appearance of Czech compliance; but Prague seems at the same time to have been able to preserve the essential substance of its democratic experiment.

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2. The compromise seems to have come about, sequentially, as a result of strong Soviet pressures, rising Czech concern, mildly concessionary Czech responses, and, finally, the Soviets' own anxiety to find some way to avoid direct military intervention. It is true, nonetheless, that if quiescence has been restored to the relationship, it is by no means assured indefinitely. An undetermined number of Soviets are currently engaged in a Warsaw Pact exercise on Czech soil; their presence serves, at a minimum, as an ominous reminder to the Dubcek regime of Soviet power and of the USSR's continuing interest in Czech developments. The recently concluded plenum of the Czechoslovak Central Committee was reassuring to the Soviets in some respects but not at all in others. Dubcek, in fact, is working both sides of the street. He is trying to buy off Moscow with promises of continued Communist authority in Czechoslovakia and unswerving Czech loyalty to the Warsaw Pact. At the same time, he is seeking to strengthen his domestic position by pledging at least the gradual growth of democracy at home and independence abroad.

Prague's Concessions, Domestic and Foreign

3. Prague yielded to the Soviets on two major foreign policy issues and on several domestic issues of great concern to the USSR. First, concerning policy toward Germany, the Czechs evidently discarded the possibility of an early move toward diplomatic recognition of West Germany. In addition, they reversed their recent public opposition to East Germany's claims on the Berlin access question and began to mute their bitter open quarrel with the Ulbricht regime.

4. Recent East German moves affecting West German access to West Berlin may cause the Czechs some considerable anxiety. A crisis over Berlin would perhaps give the Soviets a pretext for insisting that their troops in Czechoslovakia remain there at least for the duration. Some Soviet military figures apparently brought up the subject of stationing other Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia last month; the Czechs, of course, refused. But, in the event of renewed trouble over Berlin -- attended by strident Soviet propaganda against West German "fascists and revanchists" -- Prague might find it difficult to demand the removal of Pact troops already present on Czech soil.

5. In any case, as a second concession to the Soviets, the Czechs had already reaffirmed their military commitment to the Warsaw Pact. They did so both in word and deed, the latter by permitting the Pact exercises now under way. This, of course, was of crucial importance to Moscow. The political significance of Pact membership is obvious. In Czechoslovakia's case, there is in the Soviet view some considerable military significance as well. Geography aside, Czechoslovakia has contributed more manpower per capita to the forces of the Warsaw Pact than any other member state, including even the USSR, and by and large the Czechoslovak soldier is better equipped and better trained than all the others except his Soviet counterpart. There had been several indications that all this might change: the Czechs might hold fewer training exercises, decrease their participation in joing Pact exercises, shorten conscript terms, lower overall troop strength, and sharply reduce their military budget.

6. As a third concession to Moscow, the recent Central Committee plenum reasserted the leading role of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and implied that Czech political life would not be subjected to sudden and drastic change. (Even before the plenum met, the Interior Ministry had indicated that no new

political parties would be allowed to form at this time.) In a related move, the plenum -- though disposing of Novotny -- allowed most of the 40 or so relatively orthodox and pro-Soviet members of the Committee to retain their membership, at least for the time being. The plenum also went back on earlier Party statements and, well aware of Soviet sensitivities on this score, denied that the new Czechoslovak course was intended to be a model for other Communist countries and parties.

7. Dubcek personally dominated the plenum proceedings, and this must be comforting to Moscow. Whatever their suspicions of the man, the Soviets certainly prefer his leadership to some of the likely alternatives: a party without firm leadership and direction, threatening to collapse; or a party in the hands of ultra-liberals susceptible to non-communist and even anti-communist influences. In any case, the Soviets -- though still apprehensive about the continued influence of these ultra-liberals in the present regime -- now seem ready to accept that the Novotny forces probably cannot stage a comeback.

8. Finally, various Czech leaders promised to discourage anti-Soviet statements in the press. These had in recent weeks reached surprising proportions, suggesting that Soviet advisers

were implicated in the death of Masaryk, the purge of Slansky, and the genesis of Czechoslovakia's present economic problems. Some articles had doubted whether the USSR had been willing to help defend Czechoslovakia in 1938 -- in other words, doubted whether alliance with the USSR had ever done the Czechs any good. But what the Czechs have not yet publicized, what some members of the regime still implicitly call for, is the chronicle of moves last winter by Soviet officials, especially the Ambassador and Warsaw Pact representatives, as they intervened to try to save Novotny. That the Soviets are not yet satisfied with the degree of restraint the Czechs have shown and intend to keep the pressure on is indicated by Moscow's unusual resort a few days ago to a formal note protesting the anti-Soviet implications of an article on General Sejna in a Czech newspaper.

Prague's Gains

9. Clearly the principal instrument Moscow has employed against Prague during the past several weeks has been the threat

of military intervention.* The Soviets are still in a good position to use military force, and it is likely that the Soviets would prefer to intervene under cover of an exercise. Yet most signs now indicate that Moscow has decided not to use force, at least for the time being. The decline of tensions during recent weeks and authoritative reports of a new "political understanding (privately described by diplomats of both countries) are the best general signs of this. Other specific signs include the suddenly more cordial attitude toward Prague on the part of the previously hostile Polish regime and the decline of polemical innuendoes in the Soviet press.

* The extraordinary number and variety of visiting Soviet military figures have in themselves constituted ominous portents: first, Yakubovsky, the Warsaw Pact commander; then Marshals Moskalenko and Konev attended by about two dozen Soviet generals; next the Defense Minister, Grechko, along with the Chief of the Political Administration, Yepishev, and the commanders of the Soviet troops poised around Czech borders; then the chief of staff of the Warsaw Pact, Kazakov, along with more Soviet military equipment and personnel than the average Czechoslovak citizen expected or desired for a "staff" exercise; and probably Yakubovsky again, since he is scheduled to command the exercise. More than one of these Soviet officers apparently promised "good Czechoslovak communists" the aid of the Soviet army if they asked for it.

10. The first and most direct "concession" the Dubcek-Cernik regime extracted from the Soviets appears to be that the Warsaw Pact exercise will be only an exercise. The second direct gain, related to the first, may have been that the Soviets agreed that there was no need to permanently station other Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia (an agreement which, in the Soviet view, might be subject to change in the event of a flare-up over Berlin). An additional concession may be that Soviet Warsaw Pact representatives in Prague will be restricted in their activities and access to Czechoslovak officials.

11. Dubcek has probably benefited indirectly from the USSR's handling of the crisis. Most Czechs and Slovaks are likely to hold the Soviets, rather than the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, responsible for the fact that concessions were made. Soviet pressure has been blatant, and the Soviets' press tirade against the elder Masaryk greatly aroused anti-Soviet sentiments among the people at large. Dubcek and Cernik are probably credited with forestalling Soviet intervention and staving off the worst of the Soviet demands. Thus the Czech Party leaders still stand as symbols of national independence, an image cultivated to good effect

by their counterparts in Romania. Finally, the USSR's military pressures presumably alarmed the ultra-liberals, along with everyone else, and this may have led them to ease their pressures on Dubcek and Cernik for further immediate moves of democratic reform.

12. The Czech regime may also have gathered additional sympathy in Eastern Europe for its independent position partly as a consequence of Soviet heavy-handedness. Early in May, there were plausible reports that Janos Kadar had cautioned the Soviets against exerting massive pressure on the Prague government. Foreign Minister Hajek's hurried trip to Budapest on 22-24 May evidently produced additional encouragement from Kadar; Hajek expressed gratitude for "Hungarian understanding for our foreign and domestic aims" and for "moral support."* It is clearly Prague's hope that Moscow's concern over such attitudes -- both in Eastern Europe and within the Communist Parties of Western Europe -- will help to deter any rash Soviet moves.

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* Hungary's apparent moral support of Czechoslovakia was not an act of simple altruism. Hungary seeks closer relations with Western Europe and to free itself from what one Hungarian writer referred to as "Soviet Russian methods of economic policy making." Moreover, Kadar evidently wants to be a popular national figure in Hungary and something of a Danubian statesman.

The Soviet Leaders

13. Prague (like Belgrade) seems to be convinced that the Soviet leaders are divided over how to proceed vis-a-vis Czechoslovakia -- whether to be tolerant or rigid, whether to temporize, hoping for the best, or to move forcefully in order to forestall the worst. Even before tensions rose in May, some high Czechoslovak officials felt that the regime in Prague was counting on such a division to work in its favor. And in late May Pudlak said publicly:

> I have the impression that the official Soviet leaders .... support the (Czechoslovak) Party leadership and the government .... But even (in the USSR) there exists a certain difference in opinions .... I think that our task is to truthfully explain the fundamentals of the political development and changes in Czechoslovakia and, at the same time, oppose unfounded criticisms and doubts.

If the Soviet leadership is in fact divided, Prague has some added room for maneuver. Dubcek and Cernik may believe (or hope) that concessionary gestures from Prague will help to strengthen the position of the moderates in Moscow.

14. In fact, little hard information is available on current moods and maneuvers within the Soviet leadership. There are, however, three general theories concerning the impact of the Czechoslovak crisis on domestic Soviet politics:

a. Soviet leaders reacted without major disagreements or strains on the collective system, banding together to present a solid front both to the Czechs and to their own party. (The evidence for this construction is largely negative, i.e. there is nothing on the public record to refute it.)

b. Though the four top Soviet leaders were united on the Czech issue, there was discontent elsewhere within the elite. Pressures were brought to bear on these leaders by those who feared the consequences of a "do-nothing" policy and who may, in addition, have seen in this issue an opportunity for personal political gain.* (The evidence for this interpretation is slim, consisting of a few reports of uncertain reliatiliby.)

* Such pressures could have come, for example, from a stalwart on the Central Committee (someone like Yegorychev, the man who criticized the leadership's actions during the June War), or from a tough old hand in the high command (someone like Moskalenko, who in fact travelled to Prague and tried to intimidate the Czechs).

c. There were splits within the quadrumvirate itself. Kosygin was opposed to rash action and hopeful of a satisfactory solution over time. Brezhnev, perhaps urged on by Suslov, came to favor forceful moves, partly because his earlier efforts to save the situation (e.g. his interference on behalf of Novotny) had obviously failed. Eventually, some sort of compromise was worked out; Brezhnev was permitted to make a forceful (troop) move, Kosygin was then allowed to go to Czechoslovakia to try to arrange a political solution. (The evidence for this kind of scenario consists chiefly of reports from the Yugoslavs, who maintain -- with Czech concurrence -- that Kosygin and Brezhnev were indeed split along lines such as these.)

15. There is no sure way to choose among these various hypotheses. Degrees and combinations of each are possible; indeed, we are inclined to think that there was pressure from below to do something tangible about Czechoslovakia -- perhaps especially from a concerned military -- and possibly differences within the top leadership as well. All the Soviet leaders were, of course, alarmed, but some foresaw the need for sudden and dramatic action; others did not, or were fearful that hasty moves might only accelerate Czech movement out of the camp and

force the Soviets to intervene militarily. Something on the order of the compromise suggested above was then perhaps arrived at. And so far -- with help from Dubcek -- the compromise seems to be working.

The September Congress and Beyond

16. Dubcek has indicated that a main item on the agenda of the Party Congress scheduled for September will be the formal expulsion of his opposition from the Central Committee. With that done, Dubcek, according to Soviet hopes and perhaps expectations, should begin to act as Gomulka did after 1956 by gradually reimposing firm Party control over public activities. Among other things, the Soviets will look for signs that the Party is reinstituting patterns of censorship which were in effect until January 1968, restoring the Socialist and Peoples' (Catholic) parties and the National Assembly to a state of political irrelevance, and emphasizing democratic centralism rather than intra-Party democracy.

17. But Soviet hopes may be severely disappointed. Though his personality and his ideas remain in some respects unclear, Dubcek does not appear to be a Gomulka, either in temperament

or political disposition. He has already shown himself more tolerant of domestic criticism than Gomulka ever pretended to be, and many of his political preferences seem distincly unorthodox in Communist terms. He believes that Marxist notions of class conflict have no relevance to his own country, and indeed this apparently was one of the major reasons he attacked Novotny last October. Dubcek and other liberals in the Party, as indicated at the recently concluded plenum, apparently wish to make the National Front a more meaningful organization, not merely windowdressing for the Communist Party.

18. Dubcek's views presumably are to some extent a reflection of the company he keeps. Dubcek was probably responsible for Zdenek Mlynar's promotion at the plenum to full party secretary and head of the Party's legal commission. In these posts Mlynar may continue to advocate some of his own, far-reaching ideas: e.g., in his words, the establishment of a "multi-chamber representative body" similar in function to the "House of Lords and House of Commons in Britain or the Congress of the United States."

19. In addition, Premier Cernik is scheduled to present draft proposals for a new constitution at the September Congress, and many of them will probably displease the Soviets. Cernik has vigorously called for a "democratization of society" and seems to believe that the Czechoslovak government will function better if it is insured against "the system of personal power" and is made more responsive, through such means as regular press conferences and opinion polls, to the public at large. Moreover, Cernik's economic proposals will probably be aimed at lessening Czechoslovakia's economic dependence on the USSR, and more important, will probably reduce Czechoslovakia's potential military contribution to the Warsaw Pact. He evidently concluded several years ago that Czechoslovakia's disproportionate emphasis on heavy industry, including defense industry, should be corrected. Cernik and other economic reformers for some time waged an unsuccessful campaign against Novotny's inflated defense budget; now he will surely be able to set a lower figure. Also, Cernik and the other ministers appear to be drafting serious proposals aimed at extensive, if not exhaustive, judicial rehabilitation of victims of the Stalinist period in Czechoslovakia. In any event, the Czechs, not the Soviets, are increasingly likely to make decisions of this nature.

20. At some stage in the game, as projected here, the Soviets will, of course, become aware that their earlier hopes for a return to anything like the status quo ante in Czechoslovakia were without foundation. It is the Czech hope that this realization will have come too late and that the Soviets' reactions will be minimal -- limited to words alone. In part because of this hope, and in part to insure its own survival, the Czech regime will surely seek to control both the pace and scope of the process of democratization. Sudden alarm in Moscow could thus perhaps be forestalled, disagreements within the Soviet leadership could perhaps be encouraged, and a pretext for Soviet intervention -- one good enough to overcome doubts and fears within the Kremlin, within the other socialist countries, and within other communist parties -- could perhaps be avoided. Ultimately, if Dubcek and Cernik are thus able to continue to fend off both the Soviets and their potential critics at home, it is apparently their hope that a genuinely reformed and significantly freer Czechoslovakia will be able to achieve real independence within the Bloc and also restore its historic ties with the West.

21. This road, however, will certainly not be an easy one. So very much depends on the uncertain ability of the Dubcek regime to hold both itself and the Czech people together. For the moment, the Czech party -- having probably rid itself of the threat of a conservative, pro-Novotny revival -- seems to be essentially united. But the party nevertheless includes the more or less cautious (and often vague) liberals of Dubcek's stripe -- who foresee a continued, though newly benevolent Communist dominance of all political life -- and the extreme liberals -- who advocate a return to one form or another of genuine parliamentary democracy. A clash between these groups may eventually be inevitable. Moreover, given the extraordinary openess of the press and the growing feeling of political involvement among all sorts of non-communist elements, public participation in any such clash is a distinct (and complicating) possibility.

22. Thus there is a good chance that relations between Prague and Moscow will again become very tense. The Soviet leaders, or at least most of them, wish to avoid drastic and costly, military action. Nevertheless, should Dubcek's control

threaten to collapse, or should the Czech regime's policies become, in Moscow's view, "counterrevolutionary," the Soviets might once again use their troops to menace the Czech frontier.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

Abbot Smith

ABBOT SMITH
Chairman